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Converging Worlds: The State of Farm-Neighbor Relations in NYS

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Nearly four years after a second-generation New York farmer located a new 300-cow facility a few miles from his home dairy farm, several neighbors upset about strong odors brought their complaints to the town supervisor. The farmer had been completely unaware of any of his neighbors' concerns, and at a meeting called by the supervisor to address the issue was stunned by the intensity of the pent-up anger directed at him.

What is the issue?

Many close observers of agricultural and country life believe that long-term economic, social and land use trends make increasing tensions between farmers and their neighbors practically inevitable. How prevalent is this conflict in New York State and what are expectations about the future?

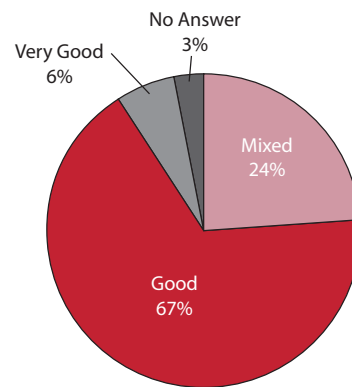
How was the research conducted?

Little research on the extent and nature of farm-neighbor conflict has been conducted in New York State, despite its potential importance for the viability of agriculture. We interviewed more than 150 individuals in 2004 and 2005 across NYS as part of a multiyear project intended to build community institutional capacity to respond to conflict more constructively. Nearly all individuals contacted were professionals in county-based positions who were likely to be aware of significant farm-neighbor and other agricultural disputes in their areas.

What were the general findings?

A majority of respondents (67%) consider current farm-neighbor relations to be good, while about a quarter of

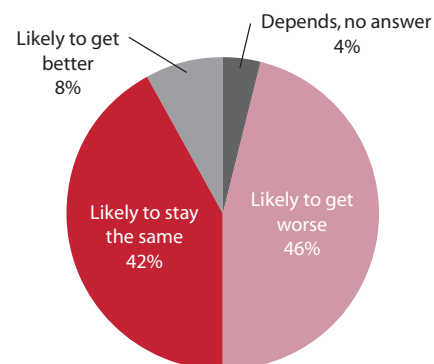
Figure 1: Current Farm-Neighbor Relations



respondents (24%) view these relations as “mixed” (see Figure 1).

However, when asked about their expectations for farm-neighbor relations in the future, almost half of the respondents (46%) expect relations to deteriorate (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Expectations of Future Farm-Neighbor Relations



The reasons these local experts give to explain their expectations of increased conflict are consistently summarized as due to:

- the growing number of nonfarm neighbors (“sprawl”, “more development pressure”, “people moving in”, etc.);
- changes in nature of farming (more consolidation, bigger farms, etc.).

What are the issues and concerns in farm-neighbor conflicts?

Issues reportedly of greatest concern for farm neighbors are:

- odor and manure, including the effect of manure on water quality;
- mud on roads, chemical use, animal welfare, farm vehicles blocking traffic, and various quality of life issues.

Issues reportedly of greatest concern for farmers are:

- a “lack of understanding” of the practices of farm businesses;
- trespassing, with specific examples of various kinds of trespass, such as ATV use and unauthorized hunting.

What are the positive and negative impacts of farm neighbor conflict?

The majority of respondents reported that farm-related conflicts had important impacts on farmers, neighbors and the community as a whole. Among the negative impacts mentioned are:

- *“I’ve seen people go out of business because of the expense of fighting the conflicts — loss of revenue, work time, increased expenditures on equipment/facility upgrades, etc.”*
- *“Farmers have been hurt by policies that curtail farming. Neighbors get angry over some practices. The burden of dealing with these situations falls on the whole community.”*
- *“There is a loss of productive time for all parties, creating larger barriers to future relations. Conflicts can result in loss of the farm or giving up farming.”*

Surprisingly, perhaps, roughly equal numbers of respondents saw good as well as bad resulting from tensions with the farm community:

- *“Everyone had a chance to speak their minds. Some misconceptions were cleared up.”*
- *“There was improvement of community understanding of farming and farming practices. Also, the conflict helped farmers to adapt operations early before more severe conflicts arise.”*
- *“The conflict is a wake-up call — there are some producers who are making a stronger effort to reach out to let their neighbors know what they are doing and when, building bridges, which has been well received.”*
- *“Enlightening for those involved. Each walked away with new knowledge about the other, including reasons for why things were done on the farm. And the farmer gained a better appreciation for what the neighbors were complaining about.”*

Conclusions

Conflict is natural, normal and here to stay. What resources are available to farmers and neighbors to resolve conflict in a productive way? Cornell Cooperative Extension and the Soil and Water Conservation district staff often help people involved in farm-neighbor conflicts. Others, led by elected public officials and state agency officials, were reported as involved only “occasionally.” However, recent growth in the scope and structure of New York State’s USDA-funded Agricultural Mediation Program offers new options for improved conflict resolution services to the farm community and its neighbors (see http://www.nysdra.org/adr/adr_nysamp.html).

As farm practices and residential patterns change, the worlds of farmers and neighbors will continue to collide. Cornell’s research documents concern for the future among local experts who are the closest observers of farm conflicts. There is a need to build new capacity today so that New York communities can more constructively handle the widely expected future burdens of increased farm-neighbor conflict.

*For additional information, see “Farms, Communities, and Collaboration: A Guide to Resolving Farm-Neighbor Conflict” by David Kay, Maralyn Edid, Judith Saul, and Lee Telega. USDA publication, 2003.

